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## '44 storm showed island what can happen

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BY NICHOLAS CLUNN  
MANAHAWKIN BUREAU

The waves demolished piers, ruined palatial hotels and drowned four elderly women who, despite warnings by the Coast Guard, had refused to leave their oceanfront homes.

These anecdotes and other tales are what's left of the hurricane of 1944, which holds the record for bringing the highest tides to Long Beach Island and stands as one of the fiercest storms ever to hit the resort.

Though other storms since then have damaged homes and flooded roads, bad storms from decades ago tend to resonate most with people old enough to have witnessed them.

Most inhabitants of this 18-mile barrier island have never been through storms of the same caliber as the 1944 hurricane.

Westfield resident Kelly Sweeney summers with her family on one of the island's thinnest portions, which is about 1,000 feet wide. But she said she hasn't thought much about hurricanes and what one could do to her home one block from the ocean in the Brant Beach section of Long Beach Township.

"We don't really think about it," she said. "If it comes, it comes, right?"

But others have taken the threat of a hurricane hitting the island more seriously.

Contractors now build homes with windows that can block gust-driven lumber. And in Washington, lawmakers this fall will consider appropriating \$5 million

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to start a major beach restoration project on the island.

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The resort would be in danger of severe damage from any major storm, said Stewart Farrell, a professor at Richard Stockton College and director of the Coastal Research Center there.

The island's vulnerability lies in its narrow and low locations, and homes built too close to the beach for protective dunes to form, experts say.

Beaches along Barnegat Light are the exception, but in most municipalities along the strand, "development was permitted to go into the toe of the dune," Farrell said. "Everyone was trying to shoehorn one more house in."

Between 40th and 60th streets in Brant Beach, views east from the bay look uphill to where oceanfront homes perch at the crest of former dunes. This is the section where Sweeney summers with her husband, Charlie, and two children.

Sweeney, 38, points to the age of her home as a reason for her security.

"This house is over 80 years old," she said. "It's been through it all."

During a hurricane, homes built before 1970 will likely fare better than most modern ones, said William Connolly, director of the state Division of Codes and Standards.

"Newer homes are more economical and they are still safe, but they are closer to the margin" of safety, he said.

To help ensure that homes built today stand a chance against a full-blown hurricane, state officials over the last nine years have strengthened building codes by adopting rules inspired by damage left in Florida by Hurricane Andrew in 1992.

Homes built today must either come with protective plywood custom cut to cover each window, or special windows whose panes will hold when smacked with a two-by-four propelled by gusts as strong as 110 mph, Connolly said.

The state also adopted a code requiring developers to strap together roofs, walls and foundations of all homes east of the Garden State Parkway, Connolly said.

Meanwhile, island officials are hopeful that Congress this fall will appropriate \$5 million toward a beach rebuilding project, which is designed to create protective dunes that minimize the risk of flooding.

The proposed amount, along with previous congressional appropriations and money from the state, would give the Army Corps of Engineers enough to start moving sand.

A 125-foot-wide beach and a 30-foot-wide sand dune with native grasses and protective fencing would be provided under the \$159 million project.

Whether the rebuilding happens before the next hurricane, or it comes too late, Pat Nissen and her husband Bob, a former mayor of Ship Bottom, will be prepared.

Though the couple's West 10th Street home made it through the March storm of 1962, the Nissens still carry a great deal of respect for nature's angry side.

Pat Nissen recalled looters invading the island by boat and having to show her

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house's deed to get home from the mainland.

*Staff writer Kirk Moore contributed to this story.*

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